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Lang, Cosmos Gordon

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ADDRESS

DELIVERED BY THE

BISHOP OF STEPNEY

(Rev. COSMO GORDON LANG, D.D.),

AT THE OPENING OF THE

Co-operative Congress Exhibition, Stratford,
LONDON.

+✂ MAY 21st, 1904. ✂+

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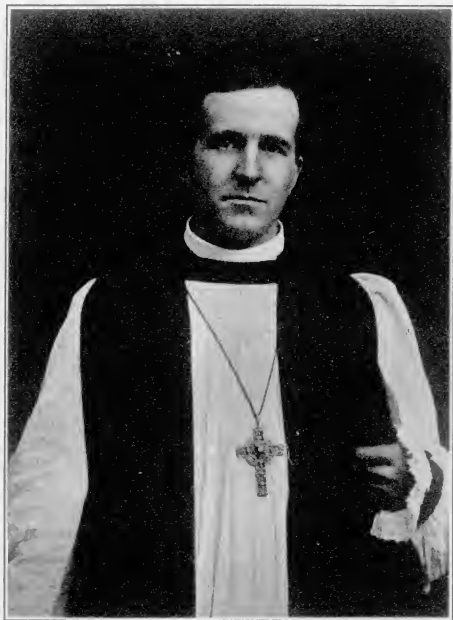
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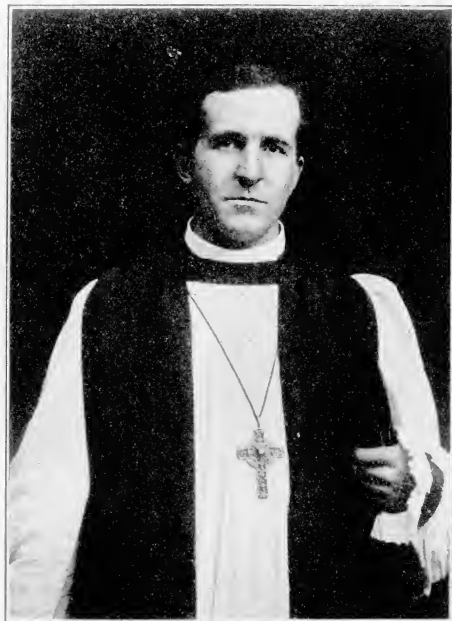
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Co-operative Union Limited, Long Millgate, Manchester



THE REV. COSMO GORDON LANG, D.D.
(Bishop of Stepney).



THE REV. CUSIO GORDON LANG, D.D.
(Bishop of Stepney).

ADDRESS.

The Bishop said he considered it a very great honour to be allowed to take part in the opening of the Congress Exhibition, where they would see gathered together the products and samples of a great industry spread over the whole country, extending in ever-increasing ties to countries abroad—an industry which had its own factories and its own fleet; an industry which, above all, was inspired, controlled, managed, and used for the benefit of the working classes of this country. It was said that they had to pay for their honours, and he had had to pay a little for his. He had just come from a long engagement at St. Paul's Cathedral, which prevented him from seeing co-operation at work in one of its characteristic forms, viz., at luncheon—and he had had some experience of co-operative knife-and-fork teas in Lancashire and Yorkshire. He would have to leave that meeting to keep another engagement at Oxford. But he did not mind paying that first cost of a little rush. The second cost was that he had walked to that platform through a long-continued path of bristling protests. With reference to the letters he had received with great persistency, and from all parts of the country, though with a certain similarity of tone and language, he would say that if their object was to commend to public men the cause of private trading, the means that were taken were singularly ill-adapted for achieving that purpose.

Why was it that public men felt that it was right to be identified with such a movement as theirs? It was because no one could study the history of the last seventy years of our country without seeing that the co-operative movement represented one of the most striking, one of the most lasting movements among the working classes, and one of the movements which did them the greatest credit. It was no exaggeration to say that one had only to look to the men best able and without prejudice, to think out the social problems of the country, to see the

value of co-operation. They would not forget the honour which John Stuart Mill paid, and the space which Professor Marshall had always given to co-operation in his books, nor the striking words which were used by one of the most careful and, if they would, one of the most orthodox of the old economists—one of the old school before they went out of fashion. Professor Caird said that what was known as co-operation was the contribution by many working men of their savings towards a common fund, which they employed as capital, and co-opted to turn it into profit. This constituted the one and only solution of our social problems, and by which the labouring classes could emerge from their condition of mere hand-to-mouth living, and share in the genius and honours of an advancing civilisation. If those words simply stood by themselves, they might be said to be a rhetorical exaggeration, but we must remember the history that lies behind the co-operative movement, and recall the circumstances in which the co-operative movement was born. Some of those present were old enough to remember that time. He had just enjoyed the privilege of shaking hands with one who did remember that time, and who carried into co-operation to-day the spirit and the traditions of the old brave men of sixty or seventy years ago. There were some who could remember the bewilderment that came upon the mass of the working classes under the rapid and almost overwhelming change that took place in industry. Men felt they were becoming "hands," not heads, and they could not see a way out of their position. But some rose who said, in the midst of all the confusion, "Let us hold together, work together." Men responded to that appeal, and the greatest thing that the co-operative movement had done was—and he would quote what Dr. Creighton (the late Bishop of London) said at the Peterborough Congress—it had "provided them with a central idea round which the working classes could gather, and from which they could again enter into the understanding of the nature of industrial life and the extent of industrial problems."

Of course, in the first days there were wild theories and ideals which sadly failed in practice; but we must never forget that the co-operative movement was the outcome of a great need, and was the outbirth of great ideals. He recalled those early days of Toad Lane, Rochdale, with twenty-eight members, a capital of £28, and a little store which was only open two days of the week. Among those twenty-eight members there was some good stuff of heart and brain, including Cooper, Smithies, and Howarth. They put their heads together and discussed that simple, practical, straightforward way of doing business that had made them proud of the success of the movement. It was successful at the first, and that little store was able to show within thirty years an annual profit of £50,000. From that spread the great co-operative movement, which now represented an annual business of over ninety millions. When they thought that that enormous business was controlled and managed for the most part by working men, by the sweat of their own brows and the thoughts of their own brains, and the vigour of their own enterprise, and was entirely for their own benefit, it was a movement which had a history behind it that justified some of the great and strong things that thoughtful men had said about its principles.

It would not do to say that co-operation in its present form had been merely a great business success. If that were all that could be said he would hesitate to say anything to commend it. He would feel it was not part of his business to promote one form of doing business more than another. They had no objection to private trade or the private trader. The private trader did a public convenience for which he got his pay. The only thing was that co-operators preferred to do that business for themselves. It was quite true that here and there in the success of a co-operative store the private trader found himself in a case of hardship. They felt sympathy for any man who suffered from the spread of saner and truer economic conditions. They could not look back on industry without feeling sorry for the master manufacturers of the days of domestic industry who were

supplanted by great capitalists. They could not but feel sympathy for the hand-loom weavers on the introduction of the power loom, and yet these things were for the greatest good of the greatest number. If co-operation were merely successful shopkeeping, there were some who would not care very much about it. But there was a principle behind it capable of doing great good, and of really training working people.

What were those principles for which co-operation stood? First of all there was the principle which was contained in that single blessed word "Co-operation." They all knew of the blessed word "Mesopotamia." It did not mean much, but the blessed word "Co-operation" had the right ring about it; it meant men holding together, men learning to respect and to trust one another. If these were not the best things we could get in our national life, he did not know what were; and, therefore, if co-operation had done nothing else but brought numbers of working men together, it was worthy of encouragement. They learned to recognise leaders whom they could trust—men of integrity, honesty, straightforwardness—and to profit by the hard task of managing money and doing business. If co-operation did nothing else than that, it would be of immense value in an age whose greatest evils come from the excessive spirit of competition. There was a moral principle, and consequently an educational value in co-operation. No one could take an intelligent part in the working, even of his store, without educating himself in the principles of commerce and industry. He was thus better able to understand the whole fabric of the commercial and industrial life of the country, and he ventured to say that the men who had been educated by the quarterly and committee meetings of the co-operative stores were best able to form an opinion upon the great issue of our fiscal relations—a question which would soon engage the attention of the country.

There was an immense educational value in the co-operative movement, and there was also an economic value. It was something to get their folk to trade with

ready money. It seemed a simple thing to say, but those who lived and worked among the poor knew what fortitude and what self-restraint were necessary before people could do their ordinary business with ready money. The essentials of civilisation were oversight and self-restraint. Then there was the principle of the regulation of industry. It did something to settle industry and commerce. It was well that there was a great organisation which was not run primarily on speculation, but was run for the sake of finding out and supplying the body of the people with what they really wanted. To have a steadying power like that in these days of speculation was of great moment. It was an economic principle of great value that the profits made, not only by the producer, but also by the distributor, should go over as wide an area of the country as possible. In his opinion, the greatest proof of the economic value of co-operation would be shown in the productive enterprises. It was disappointing that they could not make a better and braver way in the open market. The reason, however, was not always one of business capacity or of the value of the goods produced, but a very great deal of prejudice. Even apart from this he felt there was so much of the ring of the old ideals still in the management of the great factories under the care of the Wholesale Society and in the stores that he was thankful for the movement.

Lastly, there was the great social value of the co-operative movement. They could not forget the great ideals in the midst of which they were born. Sometimes it was necessary for the co-operative movement to be reminded of the ideals which should be practised at the stores. If he said to them very frankly the words of a very straightforward man, "Gentlemen, let us rid our minds of cant," he was only saying what he should to another body of people representing another and greater society—the Christian church. They all needed to be reminded of the ideals which were part of the obligation which their professions laid upon them. The working classes were banded together not only to raise their

capital, but to raise their character. They should always keep that ideal before them, and maintain the honour of the goods they produced or sold. Let it never be said of co-operative factories that they turned out shoddy articles. Let it never be said of a distributive store that it tried to make money by permitting the sale of goods which could not possibly be as cheap as represented to be unless there was sweating going on somewhere. He would like to feel that the stores everywhere stood for an educating of the people in the kind of goods they ought to want, and the kind of members they ought to expect.

Then, again, there was an immense position given to the movement because of the scale of their industry in promoting the best conditions of employment. They should never forget about the educational side of the movement, which was not to be confined to interesting people to become customers of the stores. They meant something wider, deeper, and higher. Educational funds were intended, first, that all co-operators were to show their thankfulness to God for their brains and spirits by cultivating them in the noblest and best way. They meant that every co-operator was to be a man who took a keen personal interest in the education of the children and rising young men and women of the country. They meant, if they gave entertainment and social recreation, it should be the best and most elevating, and not merely the most catchy. He wanted to feel that wherever they found a co-operator he was a man who, by his integrity and sobriety, showed that he meant to do his best to serve God and his country by raising and sustaining the moral tone of the whole community. It was in the belief that co-operators were still trying to be faithful to these great ideals in the midst of their almost overwhelming financial success that he not only declared the exhibition opened, but wished the deepest and truest success for the co-operative cause. You won't forget, will you, those great ideals in the midst of which you were born?



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